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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001323

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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN DFM SALTANOV ON INVITATION TO HAMAS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (C) On February 10 Ambassador Burns called on DFM Saltanov seeking clarification of Putin's invitation to Hamas leadership to visit Moscow. Ambassador said the announcement of an invitation to Hamas had come as an unwelcome surprise to Washington (and other Quartet capitals). It was very important to get a clear sense of Russian thinking, and avoid such surprises in the future. It was equally important to ensure that we are all still fully committed to the understandings reached in London.

¶2. (C) Saltanov stressed that Russia fully intends to abide by all London commitments and preserve the Road Map as a basis for progress. Echoing the MFA's statement (below) as well as points made separately to the Ambassador by Russian Special Envoy for the Middle East Aleksandr Kalugin, Saltanov characterized Hamas' overwhelming victory at the polls as an unwelcome surprise, but insisted that dialogue with Hamas was the most promising way forward. Saltanov indicated that a Hamas visit to Moscow is still in the planning stages. It would take place in 2-3 weeks time, before Israeli FM Tzipi Livni's visit in mid-March, but Saltanov emphasized that nothing is set yet. Similarly, he was uncertain about the level of the Hamas delegation, noting that Khalid Meshal "might" be invited. Ambassador urged Saltanov to take into account the timing of the Israeli election as it considered possible timing of a Hamas visit.

¶3. (C) Like other Quartet partners, Saltanov said, the GOR's chief objective was to prevent the situation in the Occupied Territories from worsening. After relatively positive meetings in Cairo with the Hamas leadership, he continued, the Egyptians had signaled to Moscow that follow-on talks with Hamas might prove useful as a way to complement Egypt's efforts. On the operational level, Saltanov said, any Palestinian delegation to Moscow would most likely be received at the DFM level, but he did not exclude a possible "courtesy call" on FM Lavrov. Ambassador stressed to Saltanov that a Lavrov-Hamas meeting was not a good idea and would likely be met with genuine concern in Washington.

¶4. (C) More broadly, Saltanov said, the GOR firmly supports PA President Abu Mazen and considers the possibility of the Palestinian Authority completely dominated by Hamas "destabilizing." Saltanov emphasized that Abu Mazen should retain control of the PA's foreign policy and security structures and that, given their expressed desire to take responsibility for the fate of Palestine, Hamas should abide by the agreements of the previous administration. Saltanov said the GOR understands that without guarantees for Israeli security, normalization of Israeli-Palestinian relations will not be possible. Saltanov said Hamas' recognition of Israel's right to exist would remain a very challenging issue and that it would take considerable time to work out any possible solution.

¶5. (C) He added that a pure HAMAS government would be bad for the peace process, not to mention Israel, and would make the Quartet's work all the more challenging; a "technocratic" government would be the ideal. He cautioned against the possible destabilizing consequences of cutting aid to the Palestinians and said creating an international oversight committee could give donor countries assurances that funds were channeled only for peace-building purposes. Saltanov said the GOR would be watching attentively any fault lines within Hamas and indicated that leveraging any cracks may offer the best way to manage this new situation.

Syria/Lebanon  
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¶6. (C) Saltanov said the situation in Lebanon is fragile, but noted that there is a tendency in Western capitals to exaggerate Damascus' influence over Beirut. He also said the GOR continues to press Asad to cooperate fully with the Hariri investigation.

Algeria  
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¶7. (C) Saltanov characterized Russia's relationship with Algeria as "improved" and noted Algeria has been helpful on counter-terrorism. He indicated that Putin will meet President Bouteflika in early March. Saltanov said that a packet of bilateral agreements on civilian and military issues should take its final form in the next several weeks and that the upcoming visit has generated considerable interest in the Russian business community.

MFA Statement on Hamas Invitation

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In response to a press correspondent regarding President Putin's intention to invite the Hamas leadership to Moscow in the near future, Russian MFA Spokesman Kamynin said:

"Our intention in establishing contacts with the Hamas leadership is motivated first of all by Russia's desire to prevent a serious deterioration in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, to hold open the possibility for further progress on the Road Map, to continue the search for a solution acceptable to the PA, to Israel and to the international community. Our approach is based on the need to respect the will of the Palestinian people, expressed in the legitimate democratic elections.

"In a planned meeting with the Hamas leadership, we intend to promote practical implementation of the Quartet approach agreed to at the January 20 meeting in London.

"It is important to stress that our dialogue with Hamas will take place parallel with the dialogue already underway between major regional players, in particular Egypt, and Hamas. We share the same goal - to make the Hamas leadership aware of the clear and unambiguous message of the international community about the need to take responsible decisions, corresponding to the basic interests of the whole Palestinian people and promoting the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian state, co-existing in peace and security with Israel."

BURNS